AN APPROPRIATE PATRIOTISM

July 5, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Isaiah 26:1-8
Mark 12:13-17

"...Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."
--Mark 12:17 (RSV)

The Romans never did understand it. They were not heartless tyrants. Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, was built not solely on military power, but also on law and a sense of justice and tolerance for the customs and traditions and religions of conquered people. Their occupation policy did not include persecution of other religions. In fact, the Romans were proud of their tolerance which they thought showed how civilized they were. What they couldn't understand about their Jewish subjects and then the Christians, who they understood to be a sect of Judaism, was their simple denial of the Emperor's supremacy.

When the Legions carried the Roman Eagle through the streets, Roman subjects were required to bow. It wasn't asking much actually; just a little respect... I was at Wrigley Field yesterday - and it came time for the "National Anthem" - sky was a glorious blue, ball park filled - 4th of July - and the two men next to me, with a little boy, spoke another language, and talked loudly during the "National Anthem" and didn't remove their Cubs hats - and I didn't like it much... The eagle represented the Emperor himself and the sovereignty of the state. The Jews refused to do it. "God alone is sovereign," they said. Astute Roman governors avoided the confrontation. One time a troop took the stanchion into the Temple and in a contemptuous gesture stuck it in the court yard with the eagle on top and a riot ensued - which was one of the political mistakes contributing to the end of the promising career of Pontius Pilate. That is another story. The Christians, these fanatic, messianic Jews, took up where their brothers and sisters left off. "Jesus Christ is Lord," they said and refused to bow to the eagle.

And so the conflict has been there from the beginning. The earliest Christian Creed was the simple statement, "Jesus Christ is Lord." The power of that affirmation is political as well as theological. What it meant was, "The Emperor is not Lord. The state is not Lord. Jesus Christ is." And in that simple affirmation Christianity, as Judaism has always done, deprived Rome and every totalitarianism which followed of the absolutely essential foundation upon which totalitarianism rests - namely, the supremacy of the Emperor, King, Fuhrer, Commissar, Party or State. "Jesus Christ is Lord," was not a theological abstraction. It was, more often than not, heard as a political declaration. People who said it were

not scolded for bad theology or rebuffed for bad manners but thrown into jail, or to the lions, for treason, as enemies of the state.

The conflict has been there from the beginning... in Old Testament stories about Jeremiah taking on the King and the King's minions - in the name of the one sovereign God. It is there in the best and worst of human history.

Thomas Beckett, for instance, 12th Century Archbishop of Canterbury, whose struggles with conscience and political expediency, between loyalty to his King and loyalty to God, led to his "Murder in the Cathedral" in 1170. Thomas More, for instance, 16th Century English statesman, whose loyalty to Christ and church came into conflict with his loyalty to the crown. More chose Christ and his conscience and lost his head. That's a great, poignant tale of a Man for All Seasons precisely because his patriotism - his love for England was so profound.

And, of course, that remarkable gathering of young radicals in Philadelphia, 1776, assembled to discuss the future of the Crown's colonies in the New World. The issue was very real for them. They were British subjects, many of them born in Great Britain. Before they became American patriots they had to decide to commit treason against their country. They had to struggle with their deep and noble love of their native land: their loyalty to its institutions. We are inclined to forget, I fear, that the men who signed the Declaration of Independence committed treason and in the act, declared loyalty to something other than state and King.

One of them was a minister, a Scottish Presbyterian, Pastor of the Church and President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. John Witherspoon was his name. When a document entitled "A Declaration of Independence" was submitted to the assembly by Mr. Jefferson from Virginia, the Reverend Dr. Witherspoon rose to speak to it...

He said:

> "That noble instrument upon your table, which insures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every person in the house... although these gray hairs must soon descend to the sepulcher, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country."

It is an old and complex issue. We will hear a lot about it in this Bicentennial year of the Constitution - because it is there that the uniqueness of our approach to the matter is enshrined. And it is nowhere presented with more strength than in our text this morning.

A group of his opponents hoped to discredit Jesus by asking him a question to which there is no good answer... a little like a Ted Koeppel interview: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?" The tax in question was a head tax which went directly into the Emperor's treasury. It was not a heavy tax but it was very much a symbol of the fact that Judah was under the heel of Rome; in much the same way that the hated Stamp Act

became a symbol of oppression for the American Patriots. The Zealots, a radical political organization of highly patriotic Jews, held that the tax should not be paid and recommended civil disobedience. Many secretly supported them.

However Jesus answered the question he was going to be in trouble. If he said, "Do not pay the tax. It is illegal," he would have been arrested by the Romans for sedition. If he said, "There is no issue here. The tax is legal; pay it," he would have been discredited as a collaborator, a Roman sympathizer.

Jesus' response is remarkable: "Let me see a coin." The image of Caesar was on the coin, a silver denarii, the very coin required to pay the tax. It was Caesar's money. "Give it to him," Jesus said. "It's his anyway".... "Render to God what belongs to God."

The simplest - but worst - interpretation of that text is that Jesus drew a line between the sacred and the profane, religion and politics, church and state. It seems at first that he was talking about the doctrine of two realms, spiritual and political, so popular in Western theology - "The City of God and the City of Man." In fact when this text makes an appearance in public discourse, it's usually on behalf of the separation of religion from politics. That, however, would have been totally foreign to Jesus. Instead, in the highest prophetic tradition of Judaism, Jesus was ascribing to Israel's oldest creed: God is the only Sovereign... Jesus' simple response drips with sarcasm. His hearers knew that, felt the sarcasm and understood exactly what Jesus was saying. Caesar is thrown a crumb. "Here,... look at his picture... give him what he deserves - about 25 cents worth. The Lord God, the sovereign and only King of creation, owns everything. You owe everything you have, everything you are, to Him."

His provocateurs are amazed. Their question illicited an answer they didn't expect, nor want. God is lord of all. Lord of individuals. Lord of religious institutions, Lord of Emperors and Empires. We're still amazed. It is, because of this text, very difficult to appropriate Jesus into every revolutionary cause that comes along. But it is even more difficult to make him into a conservative supporter of the status quo. He didn't say - "withhold the tax," the revolutionary gesture, and he didn't say "it doesn't matter, your religion has no political dimension," the classic conservative position. He said, do what is appropriate and remember that God alone is sovereign.

Sometimes we forget that tension. The title of the sermon suggests its antithesis - Is there an inappropriate patriotism? The answer is yes... when patriotism ascribes to nation the sovereignty that belongs to God alone: when the dark side of patriotism invests blind loyalty in state, or political system or ruler. Klaus Barbie was found guilty of crimes against humanity - deportation of Jews to Nazi concentration camps. He never expressed regret: "What is there to regret?" he asked. "I am proud to have been a commanding officer of the best military outfit in the Third Rich." Like Adolf Eichmann - who simply obeyed orders and made the trains run on time, Barbie is an example of patriotism gone crazy. He rendered far too much to Caesar. History and today's newspapers are full of examples of blind patriotism which becomes bigotry and intolerance. In

Northern Ireland, the chauvinistic pageantry of the Protestant Orange Orders is very patriotic. So is the overblown romanticism of the IRA. Adherents of both causes maintain strenuously that they are blowing up buses and machine gunning civilians because of their pure and intense love of country.

Somehow patriotism on its way to becoming bigotry always stops along the way and picks up some religion. The Ku Klux Klan has always combined the symbols of religion and the hot rhetoric of intense patriotism. So did the Nazis. Every tyrant has understood the potential of the combination, and some of the saddest chapters in our history have resulted... The Bay Pilgrims came here to exercise freedom of conscience and when they got political power they banished dissidents and hanged Quakers.

"America - Love it or Leave it," the bumper sticker urged, betraying a very basic misunderstanding of both America and an appropriate love of it. What this experiment is all about is that people are free here to disagree with their government and the majority of its citizens. True and appropriate patriotism is knowing how unique and precious that liberty is, appreciating it and celebrating it. Appropriate patriotism is never blind and uncritical.

There is a wonderful passage about the Fourth of July in Will Campbell's recently published memoir, Forty Acres and a Goat. Campbell keeps a small farm in Tennessee where among other things he collects bells. He writes:

> "I ring the big bells on the Fourth of July. Some of my neighbors used to think I was the most patriotic citizen in the valley. And I do love my country... It is home. It is ours..." And then Campbell goes on to tell how his patriotic bell ringing is also a lament,... for the slaves who lived and worked and died on his farm, "for the Iroquois and Sioux, Cherokee and Navaho..." And the very moving passage concludes with his patriotic gratitude for "the great counter ideas: tolerance, helpfulness, the notion of community..." [W. Campbell, Forty Acres and a Goat, p. 277]

True and appropriate patriotism loves this nation at its essence, that special core of liberty - which has its roots in the stubborn refusal of our forebears to hand to the emperor the obeisance that belongs to God. That reservation - that final protection of the individual's conscience is the essence of it. At our best we celebrate and defend the integrity of the individual and the personal liberty that attends it. At its best the nation itself protects the place where the individual relates to God... the conscience, the soul. That's the essence of what historian Sydney Meade called The Lively Experiment. What totalitarianism of the left or right needs and demands for its own is here allowed to be free.

The best patriotism is free to insist that the job is incomplete until the nation lives up to its dreams for itself. Honest patriotism laments that tolerance and justice and fair play are not always extended

equally. The best patriotism is self critical and realistic about the human condition and knows that majorities don't always protect rights of minorities, that a majority which is convinced of its morality will quickly conclude the immorality of the minority - which is what is so basically anti-American about the "Moral Majority." The best patriotism knows with Reinhold Niebuhr that, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible. Man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary." [The Essential Reinhold Neibuhr, edited by R. McAfee Brown, p. 160]

The best patriotism is not content with individualism so celebrated that greed becomes the norm, and personal gain the chief end of our existence. The best patriotism cannot be content with the overt exchange of public good for our war machine: with our status as first in the world in military expenditures and our declining status in most of the other human categories. We are now...

-7th in life expectancy

-10th in per student investment in education

-17th in infant mortality

-22nd in the ratio of physicians to population

The best patriotism laments that precisely because it loves so much what is good and noble and hopeful about the essence of this country. The best patriotism strives for a recovery of the sense of the commonwealth, a sense of the Public Good, the Community, the Covenant, the people, the sense of ourselves and our hope as a nation. The best patriotism sees political activity - as a responsibility - a noble calling. In terms of the text, it hears the "render to Caesar" imperative as a call to responsibility and involvement - not in spite of faith, but because of it.

Several years ago we took a group of young people on a trip overseas, ambitiously called an Adventure in Peacemaking... with a stop at a Peace Community in Northern Ireland and Iona, a community dedicated to the study of peace, and the American Submarine Base at Holy Loch... It was an important experience. It included some very tough discussions with Europeans who were not at all fond of American foreign policy, or American people. It included working in a peace community in Northern Ireland and seeing the devastated neighborhoods of Belfast. It included being briefly detained at the border and searched several times. I will never forget it, nor will I forget what I read on the plane home. I had stuck a small book of essays by Joseph Sittler in my duffle bag, and I finally got around to it after we were all safely in our seats. It was a providential coincidence. It was the week before the Fourth of July. Sittler was writing about "A Proper Love of One's Country."

"Before the word America can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism. Have you...never gone inwardly wandering among the myriad impacts of this magnificent land?--the sprawling, opulent South of the stark red earth and the blithe and lazy

skies; the tragic, lonely beauty of New England, its neat white houses and stone fences, so proper to its prim certainty; the sweep of the Middle West with its little towns set astride ten thousand Main Streets that become white concrete ribbons stretching across a countryside of incredible fertility and scope; the terrifying distances of the western states where farmers' families of a Saturday night still "run into town"--eighty miles--with ease; and the fabulous West Coast, majestic at the top where Rainier sparkles, rich and worldly-wise at the center where the land enfolds in long arms the lovely bay, and the fantastic glitter and brashness at the bottom where sprawls and brawls the City of the Angels.

> "Our American lives are impoverished if they lack a sense of identity with the country around them...
>
> "Loving, personal identification with one's own land has never been a breeder of arrogant nationalism. Indeed, a person's love for his or her own land can be the basis of respect for other people's love of their land. Just as only those who have convictions know the meaning of tolerance, so none can assess at right value the land-loves of other people except those who know and deeply love their own." [J. A. Sittler, Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 101,102]

That lovely passage from the pen of a distinguished theologian, it seems to me, is very close to an appropriate patriotism.

-A love that creates tolerance, understanding and openness to others.

-A love tough enough to be demanding, self critical.

-A love hopeful about the future.

-A love of liberty.

-A love that directs us inevitably and inexorably to the Lord and Sovereign of all.

Jesus said: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

The most important and sublime article of our faith is that God is the Lord of all - even Caesar. And that, therefore, it is God who is, as the hymn contends, "Author of Liberty."

And so... "To Thee we sing:
Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King."

Amen.